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EDITORIAL - Chavez should think again

published: Friday | April 27, 2007

We have raised previously in these columns concern for the narrowing of the democratic space in Venezuela and urged restraint on the part of the President Hugo Chavez, despite what he might perceive as a popular mandate to pursue a radical overhaul of the process of government and governance.

Chavez says he is building something called a Bolivarian revolution, which has, up to now, emerged as an ill-defined socialist construct. Its main features, so far, on the domestic front have been a lot of rhetoric, social programmes aimed at the poor, and a series of nationalisations, especially in the country's crucial oil sector.

Now, Chavez's constrictions are aimed at the media with severe dangers to freedom of expression. Indeed, many people in Venezuela, including those who broadly support President Chavez's populist economic policies, share this concern. Last week several thousands of them marched in [Caracas](#), the Venezuelan capital, to protest the plan by the Chavez administration to close the country's oldest private [television](#) network, Radio Caracas Television (RCTV).

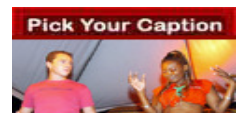
President Chavez claims that RCTV backed that 2002 coup, when he was briefly ousted, a plot which he believes was encouraged, if not hatched, by the Bush administration in Washington. Chavez, in part, appears to be getting even with the owners of RCTV. But in so doing he is also calculatingly shutting off a critical voice of dissent and weakening democracy.

It is significant that he intends to replace RCTV with a new state-run [TV](#) at which RCTV employees have been offered jobs. It seems unlikely that this new station will be a voice of independence and truth, except a truth as interpreted by the president.

Of course, he will claim the imprimatur of the Venezuela people to carry through his schemes. He has won big in [presidential elections](#), survived a recall vote and gained majorities in referenda for projects to reform the Venezuelan state. Indeed, the legislature earlier this year gave President Chavez a blank cheque with which to rule and to remake the constitution.

But what he should remember is that the will of the people is never forever and therefore never absolute. Democracy assumes a constancy of space within which various views and ideas can contend. In the absence of this space, the system gnaws on itself to a slow, agonising death. Sometimes though, the atrophy is short-circuited and there is a convulsive explosion.

It is unfortunate that many of President Chavez's actions at home and foreign policy posturings weaken support for some of the programmes of international solidarity, such as the PetroCaribe energy initiative that provide benefit for many countries, including Jamaica. Indeed, Mr. Chavez should think again about some of his approaches to policy, particularly those which impact democracy.



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